

contributions of our Nation's veterans and recommit ourselves to a sacred promise that should never be forgotten: that they served this country, and this country will always care for them no matter the challenge.

This year, for the first time, based on a resolution that I cosponsored, the Senate has recognized June as PTSD awareness month. This is a good step in our effort to raise awareness of the invisible wounds our returning servicemembers far too often face. But today in particular, we must recognize that there is so much more to be done to fully heal those wounds, support families, and truly save lives.

I recently had a meeting, one I will never forget, with a number of immensely brave West Virginia veterans and their families who were willing to publicly share the struggles they face every day as a result of PTSD.

The Department of Veterans Affairs and Department of Defense were there for our discussion in West Virginia, and I am glad they were.

We heard from wives who stand firmly by their husbands' sides as the horrors of war manifest at home in frightening ways. We heard from a father who hurts every day knowing the inner turmoil his son faces. And we heard from veterans who served their country without question, through multiple tours of duty, but have encountered nothing but stress and resistance when seeking the care they unquestionably earned.

They have faced stigma and a lack of understanding about their private struggles. And they have faced untenable—and, truthfully, life-threatening—delays in getting the strong mental health care they need.

This has been the case for two of the veterans who courageously joined our discussion—both of whom had been fighting for the benefits we owe them. I vowed to do everything I could for them, and I celebrate today knowing that with our help their benefits have been approved, and they now have some measure of peace.

But I do not rest—because there are thousands more veterans out there fighting and waiting for that good news.

Without the right care at the right time, things can start to spiral out of control for veterans with PTSD—financial hardship, marital stress, feelings of hopelessness. It is our job to deliver that care.

With the end of the Iraq war, and with tens of thousands of veterans coming home from Afghanistan, the VA and the DOD know the complexities of caring for returning servicemembers with conditions like PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury—TBI. But as the demand for mental health care increases, we must be prepared to swiftly and strongly answer the call for our newest veterans and those from every generation.

The VA recently announced that it has filled 1,600 mental health positions

and the vacancies of more than 2,000 mental health clinical providers. This is an important step, and something I pushed for. But I believe we must do more to deliver the timely, consistent, individualized care our veterans need, including providing highly-skilled doctors and therapists and making sure that care is always available.

We must end the months-long delay that places veterans in limbo when transitioning their paperwork from active duty status at the DOD to the VA. And we can no longer expect veterans tormented by mental health issues to twist and turn through multiple levels of bureaucracy to get the care we owe them.

This is a difficult issue. But we can not let the complexity be an excuse for not delivering care for our veterans. No one is more deserving.

We know the system can work for our veterans when the VA, DOD, vet centers, counselors and support networks get it right. And we know the right kind of care when it is most needed can keep families together. It can also transform and save lives.

Near the end of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln made a solemn commitment to, "bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle . . ." We should be relentless in our efforts to uphold that pledge for each and every veteran and their loved ones—today and every day.

NUCLEAR ARSENAL

Mrs. FISCHER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD a copy of the following op-ed from POLITICO.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

[From POLITICO, June 26, 2013]

MODERNIZE, DON'T ABANDON OUR NUCLEAR ARSENAL

(By: Senator Deb Fischer)

The Brandenburg Gate served as an iconic backdrop for the 20th-century struggle between freedom and oppression. Standing before the gate in the long shadow of Presidents John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan, President Barack Obama made a remarkable—and indeed a historic—announcement last week that could drastically alter the course of the 21st century for the United States and our allies.

Before thousands of German citizens, the president announced our nation was effectively abandoning the long-standing policy of "peace through strength." Instead, Obama pledged to pursue a policy of "peace with justice." "Peace with justice means pursuing the security of a world without nuclear weapons, no matter how distant that dream might be," Obama explained. Reducing our nuclear arsenal by one-third, he argued, brought us closer to this lofty goal.

Following the president's speech, the Pentagon quickly released a report on the new nuclear strategy, which succeeded in making one thing clear: The world is increasingly unstable. It states, "the risk of nuclear attack has increased"; it cites nuclear terrorism and nuclear proliferation as key threats; and it expresses concern with Russian and Chinese nuclear modernization and the "growth of China's nuclear arsenal."

In an age of persistent nuclear proliferation, it is puzzling as to why the commander in chief would endorse shedding a third of our deterrent power. Responsible national security policy requires a realistic recognition of the world as it is, not as we hope it to be.

It is naive to believe terrorists and rogue nations will be swayed by the philosophical righteousness some may attach to the president's new policy. And count me among the skeptics in believing that China or Russia will abandon its own nuclear modernization plans.

Moreover, deep reductions in strategic weapons could actually undermine the stability that characterizes current force levels. Russia is estimated to maintain several thousand tactical nuclear weapons, which are exempted from current arms reduction agreements, compared with a few hundred such devices in U.S. inventories.

The Department of Defense report notes, "large disparities in nuclear capabilities could raise concerns . . . and may not be conducive to maintaining a stable, long-term strategic relationship, especially as nuclear forces are significantly reduced." In short, as the number of strategic weapons diminishes, other nuclear weapons become more important. When potential adversaries hold greater numbers of these weapons, the U.S. and our allies are less secure.

Perhaps the president is motivated by cost reductions—a pitch to fiscal conservatives like me—reasoning that fewer weapons could save us tax dollars. This, too, is unconvincing. Testifying earlier this year before the House Appropriations Committee's Subcommittee on Energy and Water, Don Cook, the deputy administrator for Defense Programs at the National Nuclear Security Administration, stated that "not much savings will be achieved" by nuclear reductions. I received similar assessments from the directors of our national weapons labs.

Some argue deep cuts are necessary because nuclear weapons pose a threat to humanity. Lesser is better, they insist. The president suggested a similar view in his Berlin speech: "So long as nuclear weapons exist, we are not truly safe." I disagree.

Our freedom, security and prosperity are all contingent upon the United States maintaining a position of unquestioned strength. Since World War II, nuclear weapons have provided the bulwark of American national security. Nuclear deterrence is not academic; it is real. For example, the administration's recent decision to order a nuclear-capable aircraft to the Korean region earlier this year clearly reaffirmed the power and relevance of our nuclear deterrent.

The president also failed to acknowledge his previous commitments to nuclear modernization. When the Senate ratified New START in 2010, the president pledged to provide critical funding to modernize our aging nuclear forces (some still have 1960s vacuum tubes) and supporting laboratories. The reasoning was clear: As we retain fewer weapons, we must exponentially increase our confidence in their ability to fully function deterrence depends on it. This promised funding has not materialized.

The Senate should not consider additional arms reductions when we have not achieved the modernization guaranteed in exchange for the last round of cuts to the arsenal.

Despite the president's pledge to pursue the "dream" of a world without nuclear weapons, the truth is that dreams don't always match reality. The frigid reception from Kremlin officials to Obama's call for further Russian nuclear reductions was telling. Moreover, history has proved the current Russian president isn't exactly a good-faith negotiator.

It's no secret that we live in a dangerous world and national security decisions must be made to bolster—not weaken—our ability to counter a growing array of threats. A strong, safe America requires a nuclear deterrent that is modern and effective, not aging and depleted. As former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher famously warned, "This is no time to go wobbly."

COMMEMORATING THE 4TH OF JULY

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, one week from today—July 4th—we will celebrate our Nation's 237th birthday. In 1776, our forefathers issued the Declaration of Independence announcing that the 13 Colonies were free from British rule, initiating the most successful experiment in human history. Our forefathers had the revolutionary idea that "all men are created equal" and "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights". On July 4th, we gather together, at parades on Main Streets across America and at barbecues with family members and friends, to reflect on just how much we have to be thankful for as Americans.

No other country in the world has such a rich past, diverse population, and bright future. Regardless of our fellow citizens' race, religion or background, we should remember that as Americans we are all eternally bound as countrymen. The novel experiment in democracy our forefathers began more than two centuries ago continues. It continues because we actively strive—in the words of our other foundational document, the Constitution—to "form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity". For 237 years, we have been working to defend and advance the foundations of freedom and equality that this country was built upon, and to promote them abroad.

Our history is not pristine; slavery and Jim Crow stain it. Our history has been about expanding the franchise and making it possible for more and more people to participate fully in American society, to enjoy the blessings of peace and prosperity and to share in our mutual civic responsibilities. We have endured difficult periods, but every time we quarrel amongst ourselves or are attacked from the outside we regroup stronger and more resolute. History has taught us and the future will show that we are at our best when we work together. On a battlefield, factory line, classroom or Congress, nothing can stop Americans when we are determined to move the country forward.

This 4th of July, let us redouble our resolve to continue our great democratic experiment. Not just for ourselves and our posterity, but for all humankind. As the poet Archibald MacLeish wrote:

There are those who will say that the liberation of humanity, the freedom of man and

mind, is nothing but a dream. They are right. It is the American Dream.

CELEBRATING LGBT PRIDE MONTH

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise today in recognition of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender, LGBT, Pride Month. This June we recognize the efforts of millions of Americans who have fought to extend liberty and justice to all, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. Members of the LGBT community have helped this country become a leader in so many fields.

And today I also rise in celebration as a result of yesterday's decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States. Loving families across our great Nation have now been made whole, as the Supreme Court upheld the core principle that all persons must be treated equally under the law.

By striking down as unconstitutional the provision of the Defense of Marriage Act, DOMA, that limited federal marriage benefits to opposite sex couples, the Supreme Court has affirmed that there is no place for discrimination in America based on sexual orientation. Government should not interfere in the ability of men and women to marry the person they love, and they should be entitled to the same benefits as heterosexual couples, including tax benefits, rights of inheritance, health insurance, and legal marriage. The Federal Government—especially Congress and the executive branch—should act quickly to comply with and fully implement this Supreme Court ruling, following the lead of a growing number of States including Maryland that give full recognition and equality to legal marriages of same-sex couples.

Alongside their neighbors, LGBT individuals have been integral in forging this Nation into what it is today. Sadly, many members of the LGBT community encounter prejudice and discrimination on a daily basis. We cannot forget the events at the Stonewall Inn in June of 1969. Shortly thereafter the modern day gay rights movement began to take shape.

In the years since Stonewall, we have made progress in making ours a more just society. I am proud that 13 States—including Maryland by both legislative action and popular referendum—and the District of Columbia have voted to allow two consenting same-sex adults to enjoy all the happiness and privileges that come with marriage. I am proud that our men and women in uniform can no longer be told they cannot serve the country they love because of who they are in love with.

I am proud that we passed legislation, the Matthew Shepard and James Byrd, Jr. Hate Crimes Prevention Act, to expand the federal hate crimes law to include crimes motivated by a victim's actual or perceived gender, sexual orientation, or gender identity. I am proud that everyday more and more

people support equal rights for all Americans.

Despite all the progress we have made, we must always work harder to maintain the foundation of human rights on which this country is built. I believe that every American should have the opportunity to fulfill their American Dream. This is only possible when the government can provide robust civil rights for all citizens. There is still much that only we in Congress can do to make sure that every American enjoys the right of equal protection under the law.

Right now in a majority of States, an individual can be fired for their sexual orientation or gender identity and have no legal recourse. The fact that someone can be fired for simply being who they are in the year 2013 cannot be accepted. I chair the U.S. Helsinki Commission and sit on the Foreign Relations Committee, and I can tell you that human rights are directly linked to governmental guarantees and enforcement of equal protection.

This June we should recognize the remarkable contributions LGBT Americans have made to this Nation. We should also take a moment to value all the hard work, sacrifice and determination that has defined the LGBT movement.

The issues facing the LGBT community are important to all Americans. We are all harmed when homophobia trumps civility, and similarly we all succeed when we find strength in our diversity.

We have work to do. Members of the LGBT community should feel free and safe to be who they are. Now is the time for all Americans regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity to come together in the spirit of moving the country forward. The LGBT community has been part of America's storied past, and will continue to be central to our perpetual goal of building a brighter future.

Fifty years ago this month President Kennedy asked the Nation a simple question as the fight for civil rights raged across the country:

"The heart of the question is whether all Americans are to be afforded equal rights and equal opportunities, whether we are going to treat our fellow Americans as we want to be treated."

The answer then, as it is now, should be a resounding yes.

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, last week I was honored to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, PEPFAR, along with Secretary of State John Kerry; Global Aids Coordinator, Ambassador Eric Goosby; Senator MIKE ENZI; Namibian Health Minister D. Richard Kamwi, and Tatu Msangi, a PEPFAR beneficiary and nurse from Tanzania.

Ten years ago, AIDS threatened the very foundation of societies in Africa—creating millions of orphans, stalling economic development, and leaving countries stuck in poverty. Before